

From Value to Values, from Field to Discipline: Understanding Journalistic Culture in the 21st Century

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Submitted: September 4, 2020 – Accepted: September 5, 2020 – Published: September 18, 2020

Abstract

The Introduction to this Symposium, “Value and Values in the Organizational Production of News,” outlines its primary themes. It begins with an elaboration of the argument that the past few years have seen a major shift in the analytical concerns of researchers interested in the production, consumption, and institutional transformation of news. Whereas public conversations about journalism in the first two decades of the internet era were primarily oriented toward questions of “value,” a series of political shocks have called into question not only the value but the normative values of news. The Introduction then discusses the two major aims of the Symposium through an overview of the articles and essays contained herein. The first aim is to apply the theories and tools of sociology to the analysis both of news value and news value(s). The second aim is to reflect on what this analytical framework can tell us about the disciplinary relationship between journalism studies and sociology.

Keywords: Journalism studies; mass media; political protest; sociology; values.

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1 Introduction

The past few years have seen a major shift in the analytical concerns of researchers interested in the production, consumption, and institutional transformation of news. Whereas public conversations about journalism in the first two decades of the internet era were primarily oriented toward questions of “value,” a series of political shocks have called into question not only the *value* but the normative *values* of news. By value I mean the fact that sources of journalistic funding are increasingly decoupled from generic digital display advertising; in addition, with the growth of highly sophisticated digital metrics, the literal economic value of individual stories and even shorter blocks of text and multi-media can be quantified in sophisticated new ways. By value(s) in contrast, I refer to the fact that with the worldwide rise of a variety of anti-liberal political currents (Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, the power of an increasingly authoritarian China, etc) as well as the simultaneous emergence of protest movements (#BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, civil unrest and resistance in Hong Kong, and so on) journalists are increasingly being called upon to articulate and defend their normative beliefs in ways that go beyond simply the provision of factual, neutral information.

Given this intellectual and real-world shift from value to values, this symposium of *Sociologica* has two aims. The first aim is to apply the theories and tools of sociology to the analysis both of news value and news value(s). The second aim is to reflect on what this analytical framework can tell us about the disciplinary relationship between journalism studies and sociology. In the next two sections I discuss both of these aims through an overview of the articles and essays contained in this symposium.

2 From Value to Values

The first and most obvious aim of this symposium is to apply the theories and tools of various branches of sociology to the question both news value and news values. Sociologies of work, management, and quantification see the manner through which firms create economic value as central to what they study (see, for example, Stark, 2011; Boczkowski, forthcoming). Meanwhile, cultural sociology and the sociology of the professions (along with related disciplines like normative political theory) examine how workplace cultures construct and embrace normative values that give meaning to what they do (Lamont, 2000; Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006). The charge set out for the authors of these pieces was to problematize the easy conflation of value and values in newswork, a conflation that not only haunts the profession of journalism, but the academic subfield of journalism studies as well. While it may very well be the case that audience quantification, economic success, and normative values can be achieved simultaneously, this may also not necessarily be the case.

The opening invited essay by Sarah Jackson (University of Pennsylvania, Annenberg School of Communication) clearly marks this shift in focus. For Jackson (2020), reflecting on the newsroom controversies and tensions in American newsrooms that have accompanied the rise of #BlackLivesMatter, normative news values have always been at least partially subservient to the larger values of society, which means that they are unavoidably and structurally racist even as they simultaneously represent real efforts on behalf of an occupational group to enact values that help democracy function properly. Jackson’s goal in this powerful piece is for journalists to be more self-reflective about the manner by which their professional efforts can harm particular people and groups even while they purport to benefit society at large. This concern is echoed at the end of the issue in an interview with Candis Callison and Mary Lynn

Young (University of British Columbia), both of whom reflect on how their own experiences in newsrooms helped spur them into PhD programs and eventual academic positions, so they could better understand the tensions between their early, purportedly noble journalistic goals and the racialized and classed institutional constraints that stymied their efforts to incorporate social justice elements into their daily newswork. What frameworks might we, as scholars, ourselves use to understand these tensions? Can we criticize the way journalists fall short of their normative goals simply by looking at a list of ideal news values and documenting the manner in which these values are shortchanged in practice?

In the first of the peer reviewed pieces here, Juliette De Maeyer deploys a refreshingly original framework for understanding news values, one based on John Dewey's theories of valuation, and one that tackles this question head-on. Dewey, in line with his overall philosophical pragmatism, proposes in his theory that we move "value(s) to valuation, considered as an action. This action comprises both prizing (an immediate, felt dimension) and appraisal (an intellectual dimension), it moves along an ends-means continuum, and it is always situated." (De Maeyer, 2020, p. 120). De Maeyer looks at the journalistic metadiscourse that has accompanied the deployment of the stock journalistic cliché, "a nose for news," showing how this nose for news always involves some sort of situated action that bridges the gap between idealism and structural constraint. Bringing the two arguments full circle, we most certainly *cannot* interrogate the racialized elements of news production by simply documenting journalistic failures, but can perhaps interrogate the manner in which the nose for news does or does not also take into consideration the presence of racial and economic injustice in deciding what counts as appropriately newsworthy. It would be interesting to apply De Maeyer's Deweyan framework to the problems Jackson, Callison, and Young outline in their pieces to see what might new discoveries emerge.

At the conclusion of her piece, De Maeyer wisely notes that news valuation is not simply emotional and affective but also carries within it an economic calculus as well; "news is a hybrid good, with both a price-tag and a symbolic/public worth." (De Maeyer, 2020, p. 124). In their article that immediately follows, Angele Christin (Stanford University) and Caitlin Petre (Rutgers University) begin to tease out the implications of journalism's imbrication of both the economic and the symbolic. They do so by turning to Vivian Zelizer and her concept of "good matches," wherein social actors engage in complex forms of relational labor in order to smooth over the contradictions between monetary transactions and social relations. In the context of digital journalism, these tensions occur within the realm of audience quantification, and most sharply at the border between "good journalism" and "good audience metrics." Drawing on two ethnographic case studies, the authors conclude that these value/values disputes are organizationally managed by newsroom managers who engage in moral boundary-drawing, strategic invocation, domestication, reframing metrics as democratic feedback, and justifying metrics as organizational subsidies. Invoking and extending Marion Foucarde's insight that most of sociology is often silent about "bad matches," Christin and Petre themselves make on the task of looking at those moments when the "smoothing over" process fails through a series of bad matches that they helpfully generalize as *overspelling*: "when the profit-generating potential of journalists' activities was plainly spelled out and incentivized through metrics for its own sake" (Christin & Petre, 2020, p. 145).

The line between value and values, for Christin and Petre, thus exists in a state of constant tension rather than at a moment of profound change. The next piece, by Lucas Graves (University of Wisconsin-Madison) and Laurens Lauer (University Duisburg-Essen) takes stock of a moment when new values *do* manage to permeate an institutional field. Fact-checking is (along

with blogging) one of the few genuinely new phenomena to penetrate the world of journalistic work in the past twenty years. It is also work that increasingly possesses an institutional structure. But the values of that institution — as seen through changes observed at the yearly Global Fact-Checking Summit — have shifted over time, driven in part by the need to manage internal diversity and consolidate more formal structural mechanisms to coordinate a diverse membership. Drawing on extensive ethnographic and observational data, the authors argue that changes in structure can be used as a heuristic through which to understand and even measure changes in professional values. “The case of Global Fact.” They write “highlights the particular demands of codifying dominant values in a diverse, growing transnational field; it also indicates how event-level structures help to resolve these tensions, and offer a kind of scaffold for more permanent field-level governance mechanisms” (Graves & Lauer, 2020, p. 168).

Elizabeth Hansen (Harvard University) also looks at the manner in which journalistic values have shifted in the digital age, this time through the lens of “digital disruption,” which, in the world of American public radio, functioned as both a rhetorical device used to encourage change as well as a looming organizational “death sentence.” Hansen, drawing on two years of fieldwork conducted between 2014 and 2015, argues that the rhetoric of “business model disruption” deployed during that time obscured the fact that the changes that actually occurred within in news organizations lay more at the level of values (beliefs) than they did at the level of value (business model). Hansen’s embrace of an idealist lens, focusing on “the ideological clashes — the clashes over values and assessments of what matters,” perhaps primes her to see shifts in belief as at least as important as shifts in socio-material infrastructure. “One of the core disruptive effects of digital media innovations,” she concludes, “is the evolution of actors’ identities to contain more complex role relationships, which are complemented by a reconfigured set of values, and undergirded by a transformed set of practices” (Hansen, 2020, p. 190).

Two articles conclude the central section of this symposium, each of them focusing, like Hansen, on the tension between “value” and “values” which has been exacerbated by numerous socio-political shifts in journalism over past twenty years. Ronald Jacobs (SUNY-Albany), provides a comprehensive (and depressing) account of the numerous “legitimation crises” faced by Western journalists, most notably changing structures of media ownership, algorithmic disruption, and vitriolic populist attacks on expertise and professionalism (Jacobs, 2020). While these are familiar ailments, the most intriguing aspects of Jacob’s paper outline the legitimation strategies journalists can (and do) deploy in order to try to confront the manifold crises. These include making greater use of opinion columnists (who can “speak truth” in ways not normally afforded to traditional news reporters) partnering with social media companies to develop fairer, more journalistic algorithms, boycotting populist demagogues, and injecting “aesthetic values” into the public sphere. In contrast, Amanda Brouwers and Tamara Witschge (University of Groningen) stake out an optimistic position almost diametrically opposed to the pessimism of Jacobs. In their paper, these two scholars deploy a unique auto-ethnographic method in order to study, from the inside, how “hope” can function as both a value for both journalism and innovation. Most studies of journalism do not discuss hope. And most studies of entrepreneurial journalism, particularly in the last half-decade, have tended toward the cynical or at least the skeptical, looking at the larger background discourses of the California Ideology as a structure which exploits entrepreneurs as much as it empowers them. While Brouwers and Witschge acknowledge the truth of this skepticism, they also want to go beyond it and study the hopeful and idealistic motivations that drive so many individuals seeking to reinvent journalism. In their own words, “we challenge the current scholarship that predominantly views journalism from a sense of lack, or even dread. We consider entrepreneurs as those

longing for change in journalism, which means they operate not from a known, fixed understanding of the field, but much more from a sense of what is “not yet” (Bloch, in Miyazaki, 2004) and from the possible” (Brouwers & Witschge, 2020, p. 203).

All of these papers in the central, peer-reviewed section track these tensions between the possible and the impossible, and the dialectical swings between journalistic value and journalistic values. Unlike most recent academic and popular writing on the news business, they do not focus *only* on the economic side of the crisis in journalism *or* on the assault on normative values. Rather, value and values are inherently intertwined, and trying to understand one without understanding the other — as these pieces so clearly demonstrate — is a fool’s errand.

3 From Field to Discipline

The changes in the study of news and journalism over the past two decades has been remarkable, and those of us entering the discipline in the early 2000s have been able to witness the birth, growth, and healthy adolescence of an entirely new field. Twenty years ago there was no “journalism studies” as an academic field, although there were of course many studies “of journalism” housed in different segments of the Western university. This began to shift in 2000 with the establishment of the Journalism Studies division at the International Communications Association and the founding of two field consolidating journals: *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism* (Sage), and *Journalism Studies* (Routledge). More recent years have seen further disciplinization and consolidation, marked by the founding of additional journals like *Journalism Practice* (2007) and *Digital Journalism* (2013). Routledge academic publishing, in particular, continues to produce journalism related research at an astounding rate, featuring hardback imprints ranging from “Routledge Focus on Journalism,” to “Routledge Research in Journalism,” to “Journalism Studies: Theory and Practice.” A few leading scholars have even argued that *digital* journalism studies is *itself* a field, separate and apart from the study of journalism, a field marked by its own theories, problems, and canons of relevance. The days when the study of news could be found scattered across a wide variety of venerable communications subfields including “sociology,” “mass communication,” “political communication,” “cultural studies,” “media theory,” and the even more generic “media studies” seem like a long time ago.

Given all this, the second aim this symposium call is to critically reflect upon the relationship between sociology and journalism studies in the opening decades of the twenty-first century, a highly appropriate goal given the presence of these articles in an internationally oriented sociological journal. Once tightly linked, the disciplinary bonds between sociology and journalism studies have increasingly attenuated as sociology gains in methodological sophistication and journalism studies grows increasingly disciplinary. What do sociologists still have to say about journalism — if anything? And why should journalists and scholars of the media care about what sociologists have to say? Can the tools of social science, outside political science and journalism studies, help pick apart the knot of value and values discussed above?

The most direct discussion of this second aim can be found in the interviews that conclude the symposium. Callison and Young (authors of the recently published *Reckoning: Journalism’s Limits and Possibilities*) along with *MEDIA INDIGENA* podcast creator Rick Harp, do not have much to say about sociology in their conversation, but the three of them together provide a deep and personal set of insights as to why the field of journalism studies came to function the way it did and why that field so often falls short in its analysis of issues related to race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender identity. Both Callison and Young highlight the manner

in which their drive to enter the academy was driven by their hope for journalism (similar in some ways to the hope expressed by Brouwers and Witschge) and the gap between that hope and the reality they faced when they worked as professional reporters. As Young puts it,

Fundamentally though, I was compelled and I believed the idealized mission that journalism told about itself. When I worked as a journalist, I thought I was finding the truth through fact gathering through my interviews, sources. It was only until I ended up reporting on crime in Houston, Texas, for the *Houston Post* that I started to have a number of moral dilemmas and crises about: was I representing things accurately? Could I, given my level of expertise, my educational background, given the complexity of the structural and sociological landscape that I was covering?" (Harp, Callison & Young, 2020, p. 237).

This gap between ideal and reality has helped define American and Northern European journalism studies as fundamentally a *problem oriented* discipline. What Young and Callison help highlight is how some problems, under this framework, can get overlooked in favor of others.

Both Michael Schudson and Todd Gitlin (Columbia University), who wrap up this symposium in an interview with Jiang Chang (Shenzhen University), have walked the line between sociology, journalism, and communication research throughout their entire careers. Their perspective differs from that of Callison and Young in some obvious (gender, race, generational) and less obvious ways. Among the less obvious ways is their memory of another academic world, one that preceded not only the world of journalism studies but the world of a sociologically inclined media studies more generally. Interestingly enough, both remember a moment when the study of news could have been housed within the sociology of culture section at the American Sociological Association (ASA), but was not — a development that helped pave the way for today's hyper-specialized analysis of news. It is futile, of course, to wonder what a journalism studies more influenced by cultural sociology might have looked like, and perhaps the academic world of today is the better one. Nevertheless, I tend to agree with Schudson, who notes that

sometimes I do feel that my younger and intellectually talented colleagues settle too comfortably into "journalism studies" as the world that defines them. People are too content to focus only on journalism as if it were the whole universe. Journalism's a very important institution. But so are political parties. Party systems matter. And so on and so forth. The economy matters. And if you are thinking and writing only about journalism, you're going to miss stuff. And I think media-centrism is an endless danger in journalism studies. Looking at the culture of cultural studies, or the study of culture, more widely would help but so, you know, so would knowing a little about political power. There's a lot besides the news that makes a difference. I once told graduate students that the concept most sorely absent in communication studies is the concept of "institutions." Institutions matter, both in and around the media (Chang, Gitlin & Schudson, 2020, p. 254).

One of the most pressing questions for journalism studies going forward is the question of how it can occasionally "discount" the importance of its object of analysis in order to remain attentive to the other objects that also matter. It is my opinion that the articles in this symposium provide a helpful guide for how to do just that. Of course, intentions are one thing; what matters is results. In that spirit, I hope the readers of this journal find these articles of interest.

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